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Étude critique

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NÍ MHUNGAILE, Lesa (ed.), *Charlotte Brooke's Reliques of Irish Poetry*, Dublin, Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2009, ISBN 978 1 874280 77 4
SCHIRMER, Gregory, (ed.) *After the Irish An anthology of poetic translation*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2009, ISBN 978 1 85918 438 7
DE PAOR, Louis, *agus rud eile de and another thing*, Indreabhán, Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2010, ISBN 978 1 905560 54 7
BREANDÁN Ó LAIGHIN, Pádraig (eag), *An Catullus Gaelach*, BAC, Coiscéim 2010, ISBN 978 0 98652 960 3

- 1 Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, initially published at a time of relative equality between English and Irish in Ireland, illustrates the relationship between the diverse, rich poetic traditions of the island of Ireland, and, as such, represents an extraordinary achievement. It is thus particularly appropriate that it should re-appear now, at a time when Irish has become a minoritized language, and when much attention is being paid to the state of translation between Irish and English.
- 2 Lesa Ní Mhungaile's edition of the text consists of a long introduction followed by a reproduction of the 1789 edition of Brooke's volume. Part II is composed of parallel texts displaying the Irish originals of the poems (manuscript and printed sources show the depth and breadth of scholarship involved) alongside new translations proposed by Ní Mhungaile herself. Each translation is followed by extensive notes and commentaries. In her introduction to the work, Ní Mhungaile discusses the direction followed by Brooke in her translation and her relation to the English muse. She underlines the fact that despite being concerned with the notion of fidelity, her translation should more correctly

be termed “imitation” or “paraphrase” (XL). Her discussion pursues exchanges initiated by Robert Welch¹, Peter Denman² and Michael Cronin³ on the relative merits of Brooke’s translation and on the relationship between Brooke and Samuel Ferguson. In Ní Mhunghaile’s opinion, Ferguson is the better translator as he demonstrates “a greater sensitivity to the Gaelic language” (XL).

- 3 In this essay and in the commentaries Ní Mhunghaile leads us to discover the influence of James Macpherson on Brooke’s work. The aim of the inclusion of the original texts in Gaelic typeface was not primarily, she suggests, to allow readers to compare original and target texts (the texts were not presented in a parallel format) but rather to point to the authenticity of her sources. The essay underlines Brooke’s tendency to “domesticate” the Gaelic original. Ní Mhunghaile believes that this can be explained by Brooke’s preoccupation with her target audience whose tastes were formed by pre-Romantic poetry. Ní Mhunghaile’s translations also underline the modifications carried out by Brooke, the omissions and alterations that are to be found in her texts. For instance, in the translation of the song “Inghean Tais na mBanchíoch is Áilne no Laéige bfuacht” (Gentle White-Breasted Maiden) Ní Mhunghaile demonstrates major restructuring at work: the original poem consists of four stanzas while Brooke’s “translation” is fifteen verses long. Ní Mhunghaile uses this poem to underline Brooke’s method, the image of the lily, to which the subject of the poem is compared, serves as inspiration for a whole extra stanza focused on that image (149). One may wonder, in fact, if the addition made by Brooke, “No foreign graft’s inferior foot has dar’d insult the mighty root”, might not be an ironic commentary on the method she herself employed! With its extensive index, plates which give samples of the original manuscripts, and learned commentary, Lesa Ní Mhunghaile has produced a work of considerable erudition, invaluable for present and future scholars and lovers of Irish poetry.
- 4 Gregory A. Schirmer in his *After the Irish*, with its subtitle *An anthology of poetic translation*, offers a chronological approach to translations of Irish language poetry from 1720 to 2006. His introduction also provides an interesting commentary on the work of Charlotte Brooke. For Schirmer, Brooke was a cultural unionist with assimilationist tendencies. In this respect he does not agree with Lesa Ní Mhunghaile’s vision of Brooke. She investigates the shared ownership of the Gaelic texts; in Ní Mhunghaile’s opinion Charlotte Brooke paved the way for the emergence of Anglo-Irish literature. Schirmer’s reading of the process of translation is resolutely post-colonialist, emphasizing translation as conquest, while Ní Mhunghaile’s viewpoint is more nuanced. She stresses the fact that Brooke is writing as an Irishwoman, making use of “an intra-Irish discourse” (XXXIII) but she also recognizes that Brooke has a desire to make Gaelic Ireland available to the English reader.
- 5 Schirmer’s volume contributes to the study of Irish verse translation in its recognition of the translation itself as an aesthetic artefact. His method involves the printing of the original text with a literal translation on the same page, while the literary translation appears on the facing page. There is much to be admired in this work. It allows the reader to take account of the development of styles, each century’s translation reflecting the literary style of the moment. It also shows how particular poems traverse the centuries and are translated again and again; Merriman’s *The Midnight Court* for instance has captured the imagination of generations of writers from the unknown Denis Woulfe translating at the end of the 18th century to Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson in contemporary Ireland. The abundance of versions of *The Midnight Court* nonetheless underlines the absence of Brendan Behan’s version of which only fragmentary testimony

remains. The inherent fragility of the preservation of Irish language literature is appropriately highlighted by the blank pages which are dotted throughout the book, mute testimony to the disappearance of the original source.

- 6 The volume of critical essays published in Belfast in 2008, *Aistriú Éireann*, interacts with many of the preoccupations raised in the two previously mentioned volumes. Indeed, Lesa Ní Mhunchaile has an essay in the volume devoted to a critical appraisal of Charlotte Brooke. The publication of *Aistriú Éireann*, devoted to Irish language appraisal of translation between Irish and English is ground breaking event, for as Michael Cronin demonstrates through Seamus Ennis's parable of a coat worn inside out, the translation process is not regarded as a natural one. Moreover translation from Irish to English was regarded as failure for the revivalists, who envisaged translation as something that should be done from other languages into Irish. The essays collected here address a variety of issues from the translation of poetry (Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith), to the English versions of the Blasket autobiographies, to subtitling and dubbing for TG4 the Irish language television channel (Eithne O'Connell and John Walsh), and 17th century translations of sermons (Charlie Dillon), complete with extracts in French and Irish. Two articles deal with multiple versions of celebrated texts. Ríona Ní Fhrighil examines *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghair*, and its translation through out the centuries. Unfortunately the book went to press before Vona Groarke's moving rendering of the work could be included. Liam P. Ó Murchú, on the other hand, examines the versions produced by Frank O'Connor of *Cúirt an Mheánaíche*, outlining the various revisions undergone by the text.
- 7 Of particular interest is Alan Titley's account of the translation of *Ulysses* into Irish; the translation is a mark of the modernity of the Irish language. *Ulysses* has been translated into all other major world languages and it also has its place within the realm of Irish language literature. Translating *Ulysses* into any language is an enormous challenge and Titley tells of the constraints involved in deliberately mistreating the target language as Joyce deliberately misused and abused English in the original text.
- 8 It is perhaps Louis de Paor who, in the opening essay to the volume, "Cumhacht an Aistriúcháin" [The Power of Translation], has the most to say about the fraught relationship between Irish and English. Referring to the relationship of unequal power between the two languages, de Paor underlines the digestive metaphors to be found at the heart of much post-colonial theory of translation. The minority language is there to be swallowed, cannibalized amorously devoured. De Paor quotes both Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's celebrated essay "Why I Choose to Write in Irish: the Corpse Sits up and Talks Back", which refers to cannibalisation, and Biddy Jenkinson's infamous image of the curing of her skin and the preservation of her tarsi with formalin⁵. He raises questions of authority and readership and revisits some of the most important translation events in the history of translation between the two languages, among them the translation of *Táin Bó Cualigne* and *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed*. De Paor's acute awareness of the "amorous devouring" of one language by the other, elsewhere he has spoken of the smothering effect of translation, is necessarily heightened because he is himself an Irish language poet all too familiar with the double-edged sword of the quest for increased audience versus the lack of attention that a single language volume in Irish may elicit.
- 9 These preoccupations are foremost in de Paor's *modus operandi* when it comes to the presentation of his own poetry. The author of multiple collections of Irish language poetry published by Coiscéim, de Paor has also published two bilingual anthologies of his

poems in Ireland. The second such volume *agus rud eile and another thing* (the English language title appears in smaller print on the front cover of the volume) appeared from Cló Iar-Chonnachta earlier this year, while *Uimhir a Seacht: ón gcroí nach dtuigeann*, a new volume of Irish language poems, was also published in 2010 by Coiscéim. As was the case with his previous bilingual anthology, the Irish language versions are put on the facing page, forcing the reader's eye to look at them before turning to the English versions. The translations have been produced collectively, in a process described by Biddy Jenkinson elsewhere in this journal. In a new departure, *agus rud eile* is accompanied by a CD featuring Louis de Paor reading 11 of the 28 poems. The poems are accompanied by music. Ronan Browne, the musician and composer involved in the project, provides a short note indicating that his settings are conceived of as responses to the poems: "In fact, the musical setting is effectively a translation into a third language. As with any translation, it reflects the original poem while allowing it to resonate further in another dimension" (103). The readings and musical settings are accomplished haunting recordings, enabling the non Gaelic reader (or the rusty Gaelic reader) to listen to the text while following the translated version in the book. The translation process is also at the heart of the volume. In a poem called "Aithris ar Ghearáid Óg Ó Murchú"/ "Après Gerry Murphy", de Paor makes reference to another Cork poet, Gerry Murphy. While the poem pays homage to Murphy's style, addressing political issues which figure in an off-beat ironic fashion in many of Murphy's poems⁶, it also refers back to Murphy's presence in *Innti*, the magazine of the UCC Irish language poets. De Paor published Murphy's only Irish language poem "10 words in Irish for Máire Davitt" in *Innti* 13, a sardonic comment by Murphy on the whole Irish language endeavour (two of the Irish words being Yamaha and Omaha), but it also links the volume to Murphy's poem "Translation and its Discontents" whose central image, "the brindled cat is chewing/the nightingale's tongue", is used by de Paor in an English language essay on the dangers of translation⁷. This essay explains that de Paor refuses to allow immediate translation of his poetry, making his poems available initially only for their Irish speaking target audience. It is obvious that de Paor's whole approach in *agus rud eile* sees translation as facilitating access to the original text, in accordance with a principal he expressed in his earlier anthology, *Ag Greádh Bas sa Reilig Clapping in the Cemetery*:

- 10 In fact the basic principle of translation was that the English should, as far as possible, be sufficiently close to the author's own voice in English as to allow him to read his work in another language with conviction; in other words, to read his own work in another language without feeling he had become a ventriloquist's dummy speaking someone else's words⁸.
- 11 In this approach which operates both on the level of the physical apparatus of the book and with regard to the collective identity of the translators (no individual translator's voice replaces his original, unlike the enterprise at the heart of Schirmer's book where the translators are viewed as poets in their own right), he attempts to wrest power from the majority language and tilt the balance back in favour of the original Irish text.
- 12 Louis de Paor is one of the many translators involved in the final volume under review here. *Catullus Gaelach*, edited by Pádraig Breandán Ó Laighin. This emerged as a reaction to the closure of the classics department in Queen's University Belfast. The preface, written by Rónán Ó Síothcháin underlines the ancient links between Irish and Latin, the Irish translation of the *Aeneid*, translated by Solamh Ó Droma, *Imtheachta Aenesa*⁹, is the first translation of the *Aeneid* into any vernacular language, it is claimed. The project is

the collective undertaking of 49 translators, many of them celebrated scholars and poets in their own right, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Breandán Ó Doibhlin, Gabriel Rosenstock, Colm Breathnach, and Derry O'Sullivan, along with younger poets like Darena Ní Chinnéide and Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh. The undertaking seeks to be inclusive of all varieties of Irish, and the translations allow for regional dialectical variations. Translations into Scots Gaelic, Cape Breton Gaelic and Manx are also included. The book is presented in parallel text format and contains an introduction and notes by the editor. The sheer scope of the project is impressive. The collaborative nature of the undertaking leads to a multiplicity of styles and voices, ranging from Seán Ó Lúing's translation of the celebrated LXXXV "Odi et amo", which reads like an early Irish lyric in its concision and rhyming scheme, to the more conversational contemporary version of XLIII by Seán Mac Mathúna, with its concluding line that starts "Dhera, éist, an aois seo!" While the poems are artistically successful undertakings in their own right, this is also translation as a form of militancy with the translator taking on the role of *écrivain engagé*. Ó Laighin himself was one of the leaders of the Stádas movement which was active in gaining recognition for Irish as an official EU language. Here he takes issue with those who stray so far from the concept outlined in John Henry Newman's essay "The Idea of a University": for example, administrators who closed a thriving classics department which was renowned for its exceptional Byzantine Greek programme. Michael Longley, who was involved in the inception of this project (there is to be a second book containing English and Ulster Scots translations), has the following to say in a recent interview which appeared in the Irish Times: "The so-called academic planners who would close down Latin and Greek are wiping out a crucial part of the map by which we know ourselves and find the way," he argued recently. "Have the barbarians arrived? Yes. But worse, they are in charge¹⁰."

- 13 As well as challenging the barbarians and reclaiming the Latin texts as part of contemporary Irish heritage, this translation also prolongs the efforts of the state translation house An Gúm which was established in 1926 after the founding of the Free State to provide a varied literature in Irish. Coiscéim, Pádraig Ó Snodaigh's publishing house continues to pursue this objective with vigour, publishing several volumes of poetry from German (Gunter Grass, Elke Schmitter for example with translations by Gabriel Rosenstock), DVA an anthology of Slovenian literature, translations from the Catalan and Spanish by Tomás Mac Síomóin, and translations of Petrarch by Liam Hodder, to name but a few.
- 14 As this brief survey has shown, translation as an activity is vibrant and thriving in Ireland, creating bridges, enabling dialogue and contributing to intellectual debate on a variety of fronts. It also illustrates the deep-seated vitality of the Irish language, and its qualitative importance at a time when, quantitatively it has been minoritized. Biddy Jenkinson said in an interview which she gave to Mícheál Ó hUanacháin in 2008¹¹ that the familiar poster of Irish Writers always surprised her as it seemed to suggest that Irish writing started with Jonathan Swift. The present volumes are testimony to the written culture that has existed in Ireland since the first millennium AD. It is perhaps time to cast some new, more inclusive models of Irish literature, for Ireland too is "incorrigibly plural".

NOTES

1. Robert Welch, *A History of Verse Translation from the Irish 1789-1897*, London, Colin Smythe, 1988, p. 28-43.
2. Peter Denman, *Samuel Fergusson: The Literary Achievement*, London, Colin Smythe, 1988.
3. Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1996, p. 98-113.
4. Originally published in the *New York Times Book Review* on 8 January 1995, the essay was reprinted in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *Selected Essays*, (Oona Frawley ed.), Dublin, New Island Books, 2005, p. 10-24.
5. **"I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland. If I were a cornrake I would feel no obligation to have my skin cured, my tarsi injected with formalin so that I could fill a museum shelf in a world that saw no need for my kind". Biddy Jenkinson, Letter to the Editor, *Irish University Review*, Spring-Summer 1991, p. 34.**
6. The poem being imitated here is "Bang" (Gerry Murphy, *New and Selected Poems*, Dublin, Dedalus, 2006, p. 84), while Murphy's poem harks back to Greg Delanty's "The Unknown Citizens" (Greg Delanty, *Collected Poems 1986-2006*, London, Carcanet, 2006, p. 24).
7. Louis de Paor, "The Brindled Cat is Chewing the Nightingale's Tongue", in *The Watchful Heart: A New Generation of Irish Poets Poems and Essays*, (ed. Joan McBreen), The Cliffs of Moher, Salmon, 2009, p. 40-43.
8. Louis de Paor, *Ag Greadadh Bas sa Reilig*, Indreabhán Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2006, p. 231.
9. Rev. George Calder (ed.), *Imtheachta Aeniasa, The Irish Aeneid, Being a Translation Made before AD 1400*, Dublin, Irish Texts Society, 1907.
10. Eileen Battersby interview with Michael Longley, "I wish I could appear more tortured and Byronic", 27 March 2010, [<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2010/0327/1224267156158.html>] accessed 10/09/10.
11. [www.rte.ie/rnag/leitepleite]. Biddy Jenkinson, Agallamh le Mícheál Ó hÚanacháin "I bhFocail an Údair", Eanáir 2008, accessed 15/09/10.